ON SPEAKING AND HEARING

May 28, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-13

"And how is it that we hear, each of us...?"
-Acts 2:8 (RSV)

"Sometime around 1880, a language catastrophe occurred in Hawaii." So reports Lewis Thomas in his book, Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. "Thousands of immigrant workers were brought to the islands to work for the new sugar industry. These people, speaking Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and various Spanish dialects, were unable to communicate with one another or with the native Hawaiians or the English-speaking owners of the plantations, and they first did what such mixed-language populations have always done: they spoke pidgin. A pidgin is not real language at all, more like a set of verbal signals used to name objects but lacking grammatical rules needed for expressing thoughts and ideas. And then, within a single generation, a whole mass of mixed peoples began speaking a new tongue: Hawaiian Creole... with a highly sophisticated grammar..." How that happened has been the topic of much scholarly inquiry. The author of the book Roots of Language, Derek Bikerton of the University of Hawaii, concludes that the children did it. Adults could not have - did not have time to create it, learn and then teach it. It had to be from the bottom up - "the children, crowded together, jabbering away at each other, playing." [see Lewis Thomas, Late Nights Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, p. 51-54] It's a mystery. Professsor Bikerton's proposal is supported by the fact that identical twins occasionally develop a language no one else can comprehend but which clearly allows them to communicate.

The development of different languages, dialects and accents within language is a fascinating topic. Linguists trace the roots of many of the words we use back through time and geography to a Proto-Indo-European language which has vanished, except for tiny remnants handed back and forth between Germans and French and Anglo Saxons and landing, sometimes, in slang - so that "schmuck," for instance, is related to "meek" and originally to the ancient word Meug, meaning damp and slippery.

But the children creating new language by jabbering and playing certainly is reminiscent of two Bible stories: Pentecost - when people mysteriously heard the Gospel in their own tongue, and before that, one of very earliest stories - the Tower of Babel. It is a disarmingly simple story. But there are nuances and as is always the case with good stories, the power, the force, is in the nuance.

It takes place after Eden and Cain and Abel, and Noah and the flood, and immediately before the call of Abraham. It is part of the prologue to the story of God and the people of God. In the stories of creation and fall, life in and out of the garden, the flood and the promise, the Bible is setting some fundamental assumptions about God and the world and human life. These stories are not meant to be historical narratives. They are true stories because they help us see truth about ourselves.

So, after the flood people are starting history all over, chastened and wiser, one hopes. Wandering around the plains they decide to stop wandering, settle down, build a city, and a high tower. "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the whole earth." That is not a reference to the Sears Tower or the new proposal to build the world's tallest skyscraper in the South Loop, but it does sound familiar.

God is the scatterer. God's intent here is for people to move out, settle the whole earth, become different. God is a pluralist. God does not think much of racial and political and social homogeneity, it seems. But the people do, which should not come as a surprise. "Let's stick together, build a city with a wall around it, pass a few restrictive covenants, organize a few exclusive clubs, keep 'them' out." The tower is a symbol of their self-sufficiency, their pride... Now the nuance. This story has been used to criticize the Promethean tendencies of humankind to build bigger and better and fly faster and higher and to propose a kind of modesty and mediocrity as God's plan. In an overly simplistic sense it has been used to attack cities as godless and skyscrapers as symbols of sin. But the real sin here is not ambition, the reach for the stars. The real problem here is that people are resisting the will of God to spread out over the earth and become different peoples with different cultures and languages. Instead the people are trying to secure their future, their safety and well-being by clinging together, remaining exclusive.

And so God surveys the situation: sees the tight city with its proud tower and says, in essence, "This won't do. This won't do at all. I mean more than this. This exclusivity and racial purity and cultural conformity is boring." And so God does what they won't do - scatters them and gives them languages so that they will not be able to stick so tightly together but rather become a beautiful kaleidoscope of color and custom and religion and culture.

What the Bible does with this story is point to a truth about the human condition and God's will for creation. It is not an effort to answer the question of how human language developed. The truth is that there are many cultures, and that language is one of the most important expressions of that magnificent pluralism. The truth is that language also divides and

that the future hope of the world depends on being able to communicate, establishing a common language of sorts, a new way of speaking and hearing.

In the meantime we know the power of language to heal and to divide.

If you have ever traveled in a country whose language you could neither speak nor understand you know how distancing language is. It is an experience of powerlessness and weakness and some fear to not be able to communicate. It is demeaning and exhausting to have to struggle to buy a bus token or order a meal or ask for directions. And it is absolutely wonderful when someone says, "Let me help. I know English. I speak your language."

Twenty-five years ago we learned how language was part of a pattern of cultural racism, and that claiming not to intend to be racist or prejudiced made it no less powerful... Language, we learned, not only expresses a culture, it helps to form and shape a culture. And so we changed the language and it was awkward at first to replace words we had used all our lives.

At the heart of the ongoing discussion of inclusive and gender exclusive language is the truth that language is powerful. It can heal but it can also divide.

The Biblical story suggests that part of what is wrong with us has to do with the language, speaking and hearing. And if you have ever been the object of, or have used a racist slur, an ethnic insult: dago, wop, hunky, polak, spic, nigger, kike... you know how powerfully painful, how distancing, language can be.

We have trouble, not with the technique of language but with its spirit. Hugh T. Kerr wrote a wonderful article one time. "What Ever Happened to Dialogue" and noted that our inability to communicate is epidemic in spite of the energy we invest in the project. Kerr cites the unhappy incidents of students shouting down speakers whose political views differ from their own, and the sad but now rather common phenomenon of minorities living, eating and socializing together on campus, for mutual support - with the result that fewer people are talking to one another across racial barriers than ever.

"The current failure to communicate," he observes, "is not a problem of communication as if it could be solved by discovering better media. We have more media than we know what to do with. Our problem is that so many of us don't want to communicate in the first place, partly because we have nothing to say to each other, and partly because everybody seems to be mad at everybody else."

We are, it would appear, emerging from the era designated "The Me Generation" or the "New Narcissism," the time when greed became socially acceptable and blatant selfishness an admirable trait. One of the nasty by-products of that mentality was a simple refusal to listen to anyone else or even to acknowledge that there might be truth and goodness bigger than the dimensions of my own ego, that in fact there just might be something of value someone else has to say to me.

No one said it with more nastiness than Fritz Pearls:

"I do my thing and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations.
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I:
If by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped."

When that was carefully typed out and scotch-taped to your teenagers's bedroom door, you knew you were in trouble, or at least entering a new stage of family relationships.

A century ago Ibsen wrote a play about a mental hospital. The director says, "Here we are ourselves with a vengeance. Ourselves and nothing but ourselves. We go full steam through life under the pressure of self. Each one shuts himself up in the casket of self, sinks to the bottom by self-fermentation and seasons in the well of self. No one here weeps for the woes of others. No one listens to anyone else's ideas." [see Rollo May, Freedom and Destiny, p. 143]

I think we know in a personal sense that our ability to communicate very much reflects the condition of our spirit. I think we know that communication between two people may be technically correct but utterly empty if there is no dimension of spirituality in it. I think we know that communication is communion, that there is grace in it and power to heal and give life. And I think everybody knows by now that communion and communication happen when there is a mutual investment in listening as there is in speaking: when two people covenant together and listen.

We know that to love another person is to listen to him or her. To be loved is to be heard. Joe Sittler wrote an essay on marriage one time that cited a Flannery O'Connor short story about an old couple who have lived all their lives in a small cabin overlooking the Appalachian Mountains. "They were sitting there - both very aged people - in their rocking chairs on a spring day. The man said, 'Well, Sarah, I see there's still snow up there on the mountain.' Now he knew there was snow on the mountain every year. She knew there was snow every year. So why does he have to say it? Because that to perceive that, to know that at times there is snow and at times there is not snow - this was part of their observation of an eternal rhythm which made their life together. In marriage you say the same things over and over, you inquire about the same people. And this is ho-hum in one way. But it is breathtaking in another." [Grace Notes and Other Fragments, p. 18-19]

There is a word here for the world, particularly on this Memorial Day weekend. It is a day to remember those who have died in the service of country. It is a reminder that we live in an imperfect world where the inability of human beings to live together, to communicate across boundaries of race, nation and class, is expressed in war making and planning and preparing. It is a day to give thanks for the selfless sacrifice of some and to pray fervently that it not happen again. It is a day to pray for world leaders and to give thanks that the mentality of the

Tower of Babel, the lie that security can be guaranteed by higher towers, stronger walls, less communication, more powerful bombs and faster missiles, seems for the moment to have receded. It is a day to praise God for what has been said and done by Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Bush and to pray for their health, courage and strength.

"How is it that we hear?" ask the people on the day of Pentecost when suddenly this wonderfully diverse group of people begin to hear, each in his/her own language... The miracle of Pentecost is that people who could not communicate, now can, now hear something they recognize.

The enchanting possibility of the old story is that the many nations with many languages, all loved and intended by God, remember common words, words that allow them to be diverse, but also one in love and trust and peace.

There are occasions when it breaks through.

Robert Fulgham introduced a story about a Russian soldier by repeating American stereotypes... "Russians are a rotten lot, immoral, aggressive, ruthless, coarse, evil, responsible for most of the troubles in this world. They're not like us."

But sometimes we stumble on to the forgotten language of our humanity: sometimes we remember the common tongue. Nicolai Pestretsov, thirty-six, was stationed in Angola where his wife had come to visit. In a raid by a South African military unit four of his comrades were killed and he was captured. The South African military communique read: "Sgt. Pestretsov refused to leave the body of his slain wife, who was killed in the assault of the village," almost as if they couldn't believe it. "He went to the body of his wife and would not leave it..." Why, asks Fulghum, didn't he run for it? How strange. "What made him go back? Is it possible that he loved her... that he wanted to hold her in his arms one last time?... that he felt the stupidity of war... that he didn't care what became of him now?"

Fulghum says, "Here's to you, Nicolai Pestretsov, for reminding us... You kept the faith, kept it bright, kept it shining. Bless you." [All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten, p. 31-33]

That's the common language that transcends the city wall or nation or class or race.

Lewis Thomas returns to the proposition that children create language with a wonderful scenario which sounds almost like a Biblical version of the peaceable kingdom.

"The adults and wise elders of the tribe, sitting around a fire speaking a small-talk pidgin, pointing at one thing or another and muttering isolated words. No syntax, no real ideas, no metaphors. Somewhere nearby, that critical mass of children, jabbering and shouting at each other, their voices rising in the exultations of discovery, talking, talking, and forever thereafter never stopping." [Thomas, op. cit., p. 54]

Don't you suppose that's what Pentecost was like... that happy, exuberant mass of children, creating new language, new communication, speaking, but also, miraculously, hearing?

The Christian religion proclaims that the Spirit of God makes that happen and that the medium becomes the message. For what is being said and now heard and what will heal divisions and bring new life and wholeness and salvation is the most incredible word every spoken, a word for which there is never a vocabulary big or eloquent enough, yet a word which once heard must be spoken over and over again and sung and danced and shouted in the streets in every language -

God is love...
God's love has come in Jesus Christ...
God's love lives...
God's love promises peace...

And you and I, together, have a brand new language with which to love each other and to tell the world about the one who loves us all.

All praise to Him...

Amen.